

Of Doc Watson
by Peter Stone Brown

For the first half of my life that she was alive, my grandmother showed little interest in music except for watching the Lawrence Welk Show. When we were very young and she would sit for us, it was a given that that she would watch the Lawrence Welk show and my brother and I would have to find something else to do. That she would usually fall asleep watching it while sitting upright on the couch was another story. So years later when she was if I remember correctly in her eighties, it blew my mind one night when she said, "I watched Doc Watson on TV the other night and he played beautifully." Well, I damn near fell out of my chair and my dad and I looked at each other saying with our eyes, did we just hear what we just heard?

Such was the reach of Doc Watson's music, and thinking back it made sense because Doc Watson's music was for everyone. I guess I first heard him sometime in late '63 or early '64, whenever that first eponymous album on Vanguard came out. Nobody ever heard anyone play like that before, and soon every guitar player in the New York folk scene was trying to learn how to fingerpick "Deep River Blues." It was one of the songs that you had to learn how to play, just like Dave Van Ronk's version of "Cocaine."

That first Vanguard album was always my favorite because of the range of material and what Doc could do. He also played banjo, and harmonica, and sang unaccompanied and all would hit you powerfully as something deeply, honest and genuine. He could play these lightning fast runs, that would make your eyes pop out and your jaw drop in amazement. But the way he did it never came across as showing off. It simply came across as astounding, and some of his best runs, he'd just kind of slip in there while he was singing, and whether you were hearing him on a record or watching him play in person, the reaction was holy shit, how did he do that, because he did it so naturally or as Bob Dylan said in *Sing Out Magazine* in 1968, "... like water running."

I was kind of amazed in the wake of his illness and his passing to see him referred to as a bluegrass musician, though he along with Clarence White certainly influenced it and changed the role of the guitar in bluegrass from a rhythm instrument to a lead instrument. And he wasn't really a folk singer either or an old timey singer, though he came from and was part of and definitely aware of tradition. When he first appeared on the folk scene, it was kept kind of quiet that when Ralph Rinzler discovered him, he was playing electric guitar in a rockabilly band and didn't even own an acoustic.

Over the years Watson would stretch his own boundaries. Early on he recorded blues and acknowledged particularly Mississippi John Hurt, who like Watson couldn't strictly be confined to one genre, but he also included contemporary songwriters, Western Swing, a bit of Honky Tonk, and even the Moody Blues.

But in the end, what made Doc Watson truly great was aside from his seemingly effortless playing where every note was clean and clear was he always made you feel, even if you didn't like a song, that it was coming from deep inside and that he loved what he was doing. He was the real deal.